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ROUND-ABOUT SKETCHES.



ABOUT ten years back I began writing about American art in a certain New York paper. I wrote about American art, not because I believed it better than all others, but because I believed some one ought to write about it. The newspapers gave it at best but left-handed attention; the critics never made any discoveries in it, or ventured any opinions that were not safe. New talents had to reveal themselves and be taken up by the public before they found recognition in print; new ideas had to find circulation for themselves. The conventions ruled, and the press, that should have encouraged our art and been its sponsor before the public, occupied the position of a servant at the door of a ball-room, who shouts the name of each new-comer in an indifferent voice, and leaves you to find out who and what he is for yourself.

Appreciating the merits of our art, I was also not blind to its weaknesses and its faults. Honoring its ambitions and sympathizing with its trials, I possessed the intrepidity to criticise its failings without mercy, as well as to praise its successes without fear of what the Mrs. Grundies might say. A good surgeon only resorts to the knife when he cannot avoid it; then he applies it without a tremor and cuts deep. It is not for me to boast that I was a good surgeon, but I know I tried to be one, and leave the rest for my cures to attest.

At first people laughed at me. Because I made the cause of my own land my cause they accused me of undervaluing the art of others; because I dared to discover talent where it was not

suspected, and announce men whom society did not recognize among its lions, I was a fool. But time brought the compensation, as it always does. One by one the names of men whom I had put in type for the first time became more familiar in other journals than in my own; one by one the obscure toilers whom I had learned to know before the patron came knocking at their doors grew strong in popularity; native art got to be a legitimate topic of discussion and a legitimate subject of inquiry and theorization. It had only needed one hand to set the ball rolling, and mine happened to be that which began the work.

I am writing only of New York, remember. In at least one city of America our art, like our literature, had long had loyal friends and defenders. But in New York, which is only an American city by geographical accident, the national spirit which makes Boston what it is, is such a little spark that it must always be blown into flame. The art spark was the least, but it is blazing right merrily now, and the fire spreads from year to year. For the rest, New York is a great and splendid city. Like the lion in the Arab legend, it is hard to awaken, but when it is roused its roar wakes the echoes of the continent. The sympathy which, in Boston, had made art a cult, and so rendered native merit certain of recognition, did not exist on Manhattan Island. It was necessary to make native art a fashion there, just as foreign art had so long been. This done, pride, ostentation and the heedless generosity of a fat purse did the rest.

From reading about American art people got to talking about it, and from talking they advanced to buying. At first a single collector devoted him-

self to it to the exclusion of all alien works. He possessed excellent judgment, that grew with what it fed on; he bought without regard to name or fame. With the ability to recognize the merit of a painter's productions, he associated a willingness to take the chances of investment in them; for men who purchase pictures, with very few exceptions as far as I know, always regard them as investments. Their decorative beauty and sentimental associations are subordinate to their tangible value; and even while he is buying a masterpiece the average collector is congratulating himself that he will get his money back, with something over, when he is ready or is forced to sell. However, as long as he buys he should be welcome to any mental indulgence, however sordid, that he chooses.

Circumstances conspired, quite oddly, to help the cause along. The exhibition of the Thomas B. Clarke collection, in which only native works were shown, had caused wide comment, when Mr. George I. Seney failed and his gallery went under the hammer. Mr. Seney had begun collecting pictures under the tutelage of the dealers, but latterly had bought many American works of good quality. His foreign pictures exhibited a considerable average loss,—something more than 25 per cent.,—while the native canvases in every case sold at a profit. This gave our art a commercial endorsement of the utmost value. Many buyers began to patronize it who had previously given it no consideration. Mr. Seney himself immediately began to build up a collection of national character. It got to be generally understood that it paid to buy American pictures, and New York would not have been New York if it had neglected such a hint.

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Lieutenant Schuetze, who was sent to Siberia

by our government to present to the natives who succored the survivors of the hapless Jeanette expedition the souvenirs appropriated for them by Congress, has, I note, accomplished his mission. When the lieutenant had the matter first in hand a quite important literary and artistic venture was associated with it. The Century magazine had it in mind to do up Siberia in three or four articles, and arrangements were entered into with the author of the articles on the subject in the New York Herald to write, and with Charles F. Ulrich, one of the most eminent of our younger painters, to illustrate them. The author and artist were to travel under the ægis of the government, in company with its commissioner, and Ulrich was to paint such pictures and make such studies as he could, and fill out the gaps with suggestions secured by the camera. His terms were, I believe, too high, and the matter was dropped by the magazine as being altogether too costly for the probable returns. It is a pity, for the artistic results would, beyond doubt, have been extremely interesting. Ulrich was enthusiastic over the idea, and being a man of infinite ability in the rendition of character, and of indomitable energy, he would have done his best. The difficulties and inconveniences of the long journey would only have spurred him to more strenuous efforts. He went off to Venice, where he is still settled, quite blue over the failure of the scheme. The Century attempted to make more reasonable terms with W. T. Smedley, but he refused to leave America. A year later he changed his mind as to the charms of New York as a place of residence and sailed for Australia, where he is now at work providing designs for an ambitious publication illustrating and describing the country, in the style of "Picturesque America," *et al.*

alp Trumbull

